

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

The Vietnamese had failed, after hundreds of years, to win the cooperation and friendship of the Montagnards. Within only months of the creation of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program the Americans had produced an ally that would be willing to jump on grenades to save their lives while fighting the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. The best way to demonstrate and explain the dramatic difference in the results between the Vietnamese and U.S. efforts is to first examine the Montagnard tribes and the CIDG program in which they were used followed by a comparison and contrast of the Vietnamese and American approaches to dealing with this indigenous group.

The Montagnards are the indigenous mountain people of Indochina with a population estimated to be between six hundred thousand and a million people. The population is divided up into over 100 tribes. Two hundred thousand Montagnard tribesmen make up the 29 tribes that live in the central highlands of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The term Montagnard is a French word that means “mountain people.”<sup>2</sup> They are of Malayo-Polynesian descent rather than ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> They live a simple lifestyle which consists of hunting as well as slash and burn agriculture where they grow foods such as eggplant, corn, cucumbers and rice. Consequently, fertile land is a top commodity for the tribes.<sup>4</sup> The communities are centered around the village and family. The health of the tribes is always in question due to the fact that illness is traditionally treated by the village witch doctor or shaman.<sup>5</sup> When they are not sick, however, they are a physically capable society which can be attributed to their need to hunt and the labor required to maintain their crops. They have an animistic religion which gives spirits to inanimate objects. However, they also have a god named Ae Die and a devil named Tang Lie.<sup>6</sup> In general they are a very happy people who do not ask much from the world, other than to be left alone in their highland home. The details in this description are key to understanding the elements of the CIDG program and

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

must be considered when comparing and contrasting the ways in which both the South Vietnamese and the U.S. worked with the Montagnards.

The CIDG program was the result of a Southeast Asia study conducted in 1961 which concluded that the Viet Cong (VC) domination of the strategically located central highlands was a very real threat. Additionally, the South's efforts to counter this threat up to that point were ineffectual.<sup>7</sup> Initially the VC had been using offers of autonomy for the tribes and an emphasis on the South's unfulfilled promises to manipulate and convince the Montagnards to join the North in fighting for national unity.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, while they were not educated, the Montagnards were very intuitive and realized the VC were simply trying to use them for their own cause.<sup>9</sup> This and many other factors were considered during the study and the final solution was the formation of the CIDG program.

The program was started by the CIA and run by the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group through the South Vietnamese Special Forces or the Lac Luong Dac Biet (LLDB). It was made up of two main elements, village security training and civic action operations.<sup>10</sup> Buon Enao, a Rhade village, was the first village approached in October of 1961 by a U.S. embassy representative and a Special Forces medic.<sup>11</sup> During two weeks of meetings it was realized that many obstacles had to be overcome. The U.S. team learned that the South Vietnamese were unable to protect the Montagnards so many villagers supported the VC because of fear.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, they voiced concerns about the government's land redevelopment program that gave tribal land to the Vietnamese as well as the medical and educational programs that were discontinued by the South. By the end of the two weeks the team had a clear idea of what actions would be required to convince the Rhade to fight for a government that did not support or recognize them. In the second week of December the project was started with the Rhade villagers publicly pledging

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

their support for the South's cause.<sup>13</sup> This was a very significant accomplishment considering the political and social unrest that occurred between the South and the tribes in the previous decade.

The Montagnards always viewed the Vietnamese, both North and South, as outsiders in their land and were constantly seeking independence. In 1946, for their support against the Viet Minh, the French created the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina giving autonomy to the Montagnard tribes. However, as part of the 1954 Geneva Accords they fell back under the authority of South Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Their hope for an independent nation vanished without any representation or input to the convention. This loss of autonomy would give rise to an armed Montagnard resistance that would ultimately be known as Le Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Opprimees (FULRO) or United Front for Oppressed Races and would have lasting effects on the relationship between the two.<sup>15</sup> The Vietnamese felt the tribes did not belong to their modern civilized society and were more of a problem to be dealt with rather than another society to befriend. This was reflected in how the South Vietnamese government dealt with the tribes both socially and militarily.

Prior to the Geneva Accord very few ethnic Vietnamese lived in the highlands. However, in 1954, as a result of the Geneva Accords almost 80,000 refugees from the North were relocated there. Due to land reforms enacted by the South in this region many of the tribes lost invaluable land which they used for farming. A 1957 study conducted by Michigan State University reported that the fear of land grabbing and actual land grabbing itself were primary causes of discontent towards the Vietnamese.<sup>16</sup> Tension started to build and in 1958 the Rhade, one of the primary tribes, organized a passive protest march. As a result the South Vietnamese government confiscated the tribesmen's crossbows and spears which were also used by the tribes to maintain

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

their livelihood through hunting. This naturally drove the wedge deeper between the South and the Montagnards.<sup>17</sup> This prejudicial attitude was also very evident when it came to dealing with the tribes as military allies.

As mentioned before the original CIDG program was set up to be supported by the CIA and Green Beret but run by the LLDB. However, few of the LLDB advisers ever tried to learn the language or understand the culture of their CIDG troops.<sup>18</sup> Many U.S. advisers reported that LLDB soldiers refused to go into combat or conduct operations with the Montagnards.

Additionally, the LLDB would often sell their enlistments to other potential recruits or their weapons on the black market. This behavior was attributed to their dislike of the Montagnards and their refusal to cooperate with them.<sup>19</sup> Due to this rift between the South Vietnamese and the Montagnards the program was ultimately run by U.S. advisers.<sup>20</sup> The government's unbalanced social reforms and failure to form a cohesive military alliance with the Montagnards would further enforce their estranged relationship which would manifest itself on multiple occasions.

The results of the South's actions and attitudes towards the Montagnards were seen through many indicators, including uprisings and the tribesmen's overall attitude at the end of the war. The first uprising occurred in 1964 when 64 Montagnards killed 15 Vietnamese CIDG leaders, 17 Popular Force Soldiers and two civilians.<sup>21</sup> Another occurred in July and August of 1965 when FULRO seized a CIDG border camp at Buon Bring. Days later a South Vietnamese force reoccupied the camp and forced many FULRO supporters into Regional Force units further increasing tensions. Later in December FULRO forces attacked the provinces of Quang Duc and Phu Bon and killed 32 South Vietnamese troops.<sup>22</sup> After the 1964 uprising the Montagnards presented the South with a list of requests to include revamping land ownership policies, designated positions in the National Assembly and provincial governments, as well as their own

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

flag and their languages taught in local schools. Prior to this the Montagnards were asking for full independence and now they were only asking for recognition. The government considered the request but did little beyond that.<sup>23</sup> In September of 1966, following the 1965 uprisings, FULRO requested the release of FULRO prisoners, a “bill of rights” for the Montagnard tribes and the acceptance of FULRO units into the regular Vietnamese army while they maintained their ethnic identity.<sup>24</sup> Once again they were not asking for full autonomy, only recognition, and once again the government never followed through. Honoring these requests would have paid enormous dividends in making the tribes strong allies of the South. Nothing changed however, and the tribes’ attitudes began to reflect this.

Another sign of the South’s failure was the Montagnards’ attitude of indifference after they began to be accepted by the Vietnamese government. Up until the war the Vietnamese referred to them as “Moi” which means savages. It was not until 1966, when the Montagnards had already been fighting for them for five years, that the South Vietnamese government finally started referring to them as “Dong Bao Thuong” or compatriots of the highlands.<sup>25</sup> This was probably more of a forced acknowledgement that the Montagnards were sacrificing so much to support the South’s cause of freedom and democracy rather than an actual acceptance of them as citizens of Vietnam. Regardless, the same feelings of animosity continued to exist between the two societies. When the CIDG finally came to an end in 1970, as the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group redeployed to the US, the 100 CIDG camps that had been established were converted to “ranger border defense battalions.” The troops would stay in their region and maintain their ethnic identity while also becoming official members of the South Vietnamese armed forces which would include all the pay and benefits that came with such an enlistment. Fourteen thousand five hundred of the seventeen thousand CIDG troops actually converted creating 37 new ranger

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

battalions.<sup>26</sup> After so many years of neglect from the South however this meant very little to the Montagnards. Many of the fighters had been with the program since it began in 1961 and were tired. Many tribesmen stated that they felt they had received little from the Vietnamese government for all of their sacrifice and support.<sup>27</sup> The South Vietnamese were blinded by their prejudice and threw away a perfect opportunity to create a loyal ally. This is very different than the view and feelings the Americans had when they first encountered the Montagnard tribes in 1961.

When U.S. troops started working with the tribes in the fall of 1961 they were happy with the potential the Montagnards offered. The Special Forces soldiers found them to be a very happy and cooperative people who learned fast and were as familiar with the surrounding areas as they were with their own villages.<sup>28</sup> This proved invaluable for running the program and, once they were accepted into the Montagnard community, the Green Berets set off to train them as professionals and meet their needs as people.

The first requirement for the program was village security. This was the start of the Village Defense Program (VDP), a sub set of the CIDG program. The Green Berets established themselves in a central village (Buon Enao) where they fortified the village and began recruiting and training local tribesmen. They would train two main fighting forces. The first was the strike force, which was the only full-time military force that received pay. These soldiers were used to help other villages under siege, reinforce an area threatened by the VC or gather intelligence by patrolling between villages. Next they trained the village defenders. These tribesmen were given the basics of village defense and small arms use. Afterwards they were sent back to their villages to live and work. As part of their training they were given a radio they could use to call the strike force if the village came under attack.<sup>29</sup> The program proved to be very popular and

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

there was no shortage of recruits. By April of 1962 they had trained 1,000 village defenders who were defending 28 villages and the strike team now numbered 300.<sup>30</sup> As the conflict grew from an insurgency and gained large scale conventional elements the CIDG program expanded from its original idea. The initial concept kept the Montagnards around their own villages simply to keep the VC from infiltrating the local population and gaining control of the highlands.<sup>31</sup> In 1965 mobile strike units known as MIKE units started conducting offensive operations which took Montagnards away from their local areas and villages.<sup>32</sup> This was very significant considering how oriented the communities were around the family. In order to understand why the Montagnards, who had been neglected by the Vietnamese government for so many years, would be willing to stray from their own villages to defend the South Vietnamese the civic actions that took place under the CIDG program must be explored.

Unlike the South Vietnamese, the U.S. forces listened to and understood the needs of the villages and incorporated these into the civic projects. They also tried to understand and respect their religion and social taboos to the max extent possible. Additionally, the villagers were as concerned about their families' health as Americans were about theirs.<sup>33</sup> For this reason many considered the medical personnel and the care they provided "to be the most influential and productive of all the various civic action programs."<sup>34</sup> Also, the U.S. Special Forces soldiers assisted in building hospitals, schools, roads, and churches along with implementing sewage, irrigation, home improvement, and educational projects.<sup>35</sup> These projects directly improved the quality of life for the Montagnard people. This also demonstrated that the Americans truly cared for the tribes' well being and were willing to put their money where their mouth was. These civic actions and the military training provided by the Special Forces established a solid bond

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

between the Americans and the tribesmen. The strength of this bond would ultimately be the yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of the CIDG program.

The devotion the Montagnards demonstrated for their American advisers was second to none. Sacrificing themselves to save a Green Beret was common place throughout the war. Jon R. Cavaiani, a Special Forces Sergeant, recalled when one of the tribesmen he was assigned to realized that Sgt. Cavaiani had just set off a tripwire and threw himself on top of the explosive killing himself to save Cavaiani's life.<sup>36</sup> Bob Donoghue who worked with Bru tribesmen at Khe Sanh, recalled arguing with them about who would get the first ride out of a combat zone on a helicopter when there was only one seat left. They would always insist that their American friends and advisers got out first.<sup>37</sup> This relationship with the Montagnards and the mutual dedication and admiration between the Americans and tribesmen would prove invaluable as the CIDG program was conceived and matured throughout the war. This same bond could have been formed many times over between the Montagnards and the South. However, like so many times before the Vietnamese chose a road of prejudice and neglect even after the CIDG program was ended and the units were absorbed into the South Vietnamese Army.<sup>38</sup>

The South Vietnamese failed to capitalize on a critical human resource. Their arrogance and prejudice towards the Montagnards precluded them from winning an ally who would have fought to the bitter end for them. Instead they produced a hate and discontent between the two societies which only served to create further social upheaval in the South. In stark contrast the U.S. soldiers created friendships that would last beyond the war. They did this by simply meeting the needs and respecting the customs of the indigenous population with which they worked. With little to no knowledge of the Montagnards the Green Berets quickly learned about their culture allowing them to accomplish their mission of creating an effective fighting force to defend



A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

against communist aggression. As a result of their efforts the Montagnards became extremely loyal friends and allies who were probably more dedicated to their U.S. advisers than to the South Vietnamese struggle for democracy. It is a common tirade that American forces are culturally insensitive and are incapable of learning about the indigenous populations with which they work. However, the experiences of America's Special Forces in Vietnam are a clear counter to this inaccurate rant. These stories and lessons learned cannot be forgotten and if applied correctly in Iraq and Afghanistan can undoubtedly create a fiercely loyal ally that may one day be willing to jump on a grenade for the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 20.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 248.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>8</sup> Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, Spencer C. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, & Military History*. 276

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>16</sup> Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 20.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 248.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 64.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 64.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam* , 20.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 380.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>28</sup> *Special Forces Vietnam*, DVD, Traditions Military Videos.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 249.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 249.

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

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<sup>32</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Special Forces Vietnam, DVD, Traditions Military Videos.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam*, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>36</sup> Steinman, Ron. *The Soldiers' Story*, 184.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, *The US Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support, The Final Years 1965-1973*, 380.

A Failure to Capitalize  
LCDR Jason Sparks

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